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Tim Winton and the ethics of the neighbour here and now

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ethical concept of the neighbour, an idea central to the fiction of Tim Winton. The first part focuses on how the ghosts in *Cloudstreet* symbolize an Australian culture haunted by the injustices of colonization, especially the dispossession of the Indigenous people. The second part looks at the paradox of being commanded to love one's neighbour, comparing an early story, "Neighbours", to Winton's recent novel *Eyrie*. The third part looks at Winton's ethics of neighbourliness in light of recent critical reworkings of this concept by Slavoj Žižek and Kenneth Reinhard. Central to this section is the importance of time and place to the ethics of the neighbour, in particular the repeated insistence by both Winton and his critics that, rather than focusing on the past, we should acknowledge the neighbour who stands before us in the here and now.

KEYWORDS

Tim Winton; Australian literature; Indigenous; ethics; neighbour; haunting

The plot of Australian author Tim Winton's (1992) most famous novel, *Cloudstreet*, revolves around the cohabitation of two families, the Lambs and the Pickles, in one big house. Forced to live as neighbours in spite of their differences, they slowly form alliances and connections that become the basis for a communal ethic. This theme of neighbourliness is central to Winton's literary vision: the story of Queenie Cookson's protest against the whaling industry in *Shallows* (Winton 1984), for instance, is framed by the long-running feud between the Coupar and Pustling families; despite their mutual suspicion, the neighbours in *In the Winter Dark* (Winton 1988) are drawn so tightly together by a mysterious threat that Winton's first-person narrator shares their dreams and memories; while *Dirt Music* (Winton 2003) juxtaposes the fishing community of White Point to the lone figure of poacher and outsider Luther Fox. The skill and complexity with which Winton portrays these neighbourly interactions tends to push the marginal figures that haunt the edges of his texts, such as the ghosts in *Cloudstreet*, into the background. These liminal entities exist on the threshold of the community, so that even as they shape its limits they are still excluded from participation. In this article, I aim to explore how Winton struggles to formulate a postcolonial ethics of neighbourliness that addresses the urgency of the here and now.

Ghosts of the past

The house in *Cloudstreet* may be read as a symbolic microcosm of Australian society, with the Lambs and the Pickles both entering its rooms as settlers, displaced from their previous

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homes into a new abode that possesses a traumatic history of its own. This house, Winton recounts, was once a home for Indigenous women, created by a "very respectable woman" (in reality, "a nasty piece of work") who, out of a mixture of religion, boredom, and vanity, transforms herself into "the Daisy Bates of the city" (Winton 1992, 35–36). The historical Daisy Bates ([1938] 1973) was an Irish immigrant who, in the early 20th century, worked for many years as a self-styled "Protector of Aborigines" and published a book about her experiences, *The Passing of the Aborigines*. For all her benevolent rhetoric, Bates believed that Indigenous people were inherently inferior and that their extinction was inevitable. Winton thus roots the traumatic origin of the *Cloudstreet* ghosts in Australia's imperial history.

There are two ghosts in the novel: a young Indigenous woman who, having killed herself with ant poison, brings about the closure of the charity home, and the old woman herself, who dies from a heart attack several weeks later. As Michael R. Griffiths (2014) points out, that there is more than one kind of ghost is significant: "Cloudstreet is haunted by both the widow and the shadow girl, coloniser and colonised: what haunts and is therefore politically constitutive is not only the claim of Indigenous political priority, but its thwarting, disruption and colonisation" (84). Indeed, the idea of haunting in *Cloudstreet* being the result of the trauma of colonization is a recurrent theme in the recent critical literature. David Crouch (2007), for example, analyses *Cloudstreet* as an example of the Australian ghost story, a genre in which "the presence of ghosts can be read as traces of historical traumas, fears which are often exposed in expressions of apprehensive (un)settlement" (94). Gelder and Salzman (2009) note the influence of Toni Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*, "a Gothic novel about a family who live in a house haunted by a murdered child" (Gelder and Salzman 2009, 27), on the construction of *Cloudstreet*:

> But if we remember that *Cloudstreet* is a pre-*Mabo* novel, its historical predicament returns to haunt. The novel's Gothic sensibility puts it in touch with an earlier moment that saw Aboriginal people dispossessed from their land and brought under the supervision of people like the rich widow who had first owned the house. But this remains a subdued theme that is never pursued. Aboriginal histories are removed from the novel; the only Aboriginal figures who manage to appear are cast as non-real, spectral, ethereal. (30)

Fiona Morrison (1999) similarly notes the novel's roots in Australia's colonial history, especially the lingering presence of the ghosts. "The haunting in *Cloudstreet* represents the continuous eruption of the strange in the familiar", she writes, "where the 'return of a repressed' is the return of the murderous text of colonial history that prevents full belonging for whitefellas" (1999, 5). The ghosts signify a "return of the repressed", a painful legacy of Indigenous dispossession in Australia's history that Winton, according to these prominent critics, deals with in a less than satisfactory manner.

The metaphor of ghosts and haunting in the construction of Australian cultural identity has a long history. Laurie Duggan's (2001) *Ghost Nation*, for instance, traces this symbolism in the development of modern Australia, from Federation until the beginning of the Second World War. Duggan highlights how the influence in Britain of Matthew Arnold's ([1869] 2009) *Culture and Anarchy*, which tied notions of culture to national and racial identity, was replicated in Australia. "Federated Australia", Duggan writes, "was a product of these imported discourses" (2001, xiii). Drawing on the work

of Benedict Anderson and Henri Lefebvre, Duggan notes how the creation of Australia as an imaginary space has had a particularly deleterious effect:

> Often enough, naming spaces and imagining them can be the same thing. […] The creation of imaginary space may also be a violent act. […] These classifications may succeed in displacing the original inhabitants of an area through rendering them invisible. The process may become apparent if we examine nineteenth-century Australian painting and its inclusion or exclusion of Aboriginal figures. […] The administration of imagined space begins when the process whereby "reality" is manifested through discovery and realisation reaches the limits of its global appropriations. (xii–xiii)

Colonization proceeds from an imaginary co-option of Australia – its names, its history, its myths, its very identity are all re-imagined in a way that pointedly excludes Indigenous people. As such, the latter are made "invisible" by their exclusion from the national mythology. The ghosts that haunt Australia derive from the fact that Indigenous people are not imaginary but *real*, a "glitch" in the colonial narrative that can only admit their existence on the condition that they are marked, in the words of Gelder and Salzman, as "non-real, spectral, ethereal" (2009, 30).

In 2015, Winton wrote a newspaper editorial in which he makes a moral plea for an end to Australia's draconian policy towards asylum seekers, another category of people the state has attempted to render "invisible". Winton reminds his reader that the early settlers of Australia were the invisible people of their time: "Victorian England extracted energy and sexual pleasure from the faceless bodies of the poor. When they became a nuisance, they were exported, 'offshored.' In chains. Some of these faceless, degraded people were our ancestors" (2015a). Despite such brutal origins, these immigrants imagined a better country in which the biblical command to love your neighbour and the Australian egalitarian tradition coincided:

> In this country, a nation built upon people fleeing brutes and brutality for 200 years, we have a tradition of fairness and decency and openness of which we're rightly proud. Whether we're inspired by the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, the universal dignity of humankind, or the sanctity of the individual, we've always thought it low and cowardly to avert our gaze from someone in trouble or need, to turn our face from them as thought they did not exist. […] That's where our tradition of mateship comes from. Not from closing ranks against the outsider, but from lifting someone else up, helping them out, resisting the cowardly urge to walk by. (2015a)

Winton lauds Australia for previous acts of compassion, such as opening its doors to Vietnamese refugees under the leadership of Malcolm Fraser. "A sense of comfort built upon the crushed spirits of children", he warns, "is but a delusion that feeds ghosts and unleashes fresh terrors" (2015a). Missing from Winton's discourse are the many negative examples from Australia's history, from the treatment of Indigenous peoples to the White Australia Policy, which show how Australia, for all its egalitarian rhetoric, has in practice often failed to meet its ideals.

Critics writing about Winton's work have taken him to task for his inconsistency in dealing with Australia's past, especially with regard to Indigenous issues. In *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, however, Lyn McCredden (2016) reminds the reader that Winton "is in no way a static writer", that his work "has evolved and matured" during his long career (132). McCredden contextualizes the circumstances of *Cloudstreet*'s composition, for instance, by recalling that

> Winton was writing *Cloudstreet* in the four years leading up to publication in 1991, [the] very same period in which the watershed High Court case on Indigenous land rights, the nationally, deeply significant *Mabo and Another v. The State of Queensland and Another* (1989) was being assembled and heard. (135)

McCredden compares *Cloudstreet* and Mudrooroo's (1991) *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, to highlight the disconnection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices in Australian literature at the time:

> *Cloudstreet* is a novel by a young and emerging white author from Western Australia, written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous Australian looking back at Australia as it began to grapple with its postwar and 1960s European identity. It does have a consciousness that Indigenous Australians have something very important to say to white Australia, but it has not yet fully found a way of addressing or acknowledging what that is. (137)

McCredden shows how Australian cultural attitudes towards Indigenous culture have shifted and matured in the three decades since Winton's novel was published, especially in the wake of the *Mabo* case. How Australia imagined itself 30 years ago is not the same as today, and this is reflected, in turn, in Winton's writing.

This argument bears some scrutiny, given the greater engagement with Indigenous culture in Winton's more recent publications. In *Dirt Music*, for instance, Luther Fox stumbles upon a cave covered with ancient paintings as he wanders through the wilderness, his maps having been torn up by a young Indigenous man, Axle, in a pointed refutation of the colonial equation of maps with ownership. In the story "Aquifer" from *The Turning*, Winton (2006) explores the historical circularity of violence by symbolically re-enacting the dispossession of the Indigenous people in the form of the Jones family, who are evicted from their home at the story's end. In *Breath* (Winton 2009), Bruce Pike learns to play the didgeridoo, an Indigenous instrument that requires the skill of circular breathing, adding a further layer to the novel's central metaphor. In *Eyrie* (Winton 2015c), Kai comes face to face with a painting of a Wandjina, an Indigenous rain spirit, which takes the little boy under its protection. The reader gets a better picture of Winton's perspective on Indigenous issues, however, from his recent non-fictional writings. In the memoir *Island Home*, for instance, he lavishes praise on the "wisdom" of Indigenous culture:

> Aboriginal Australians are disarmingly stoical. Few seem to envy the lives of their non-indigenous countrymen. In fact there are some notable elders who openly pity any citizen who lacks the richness of traditional culture. They don't see themselves as victims but as carriers of ancient and hard-won knowledge at once philosophically sophisticated and practical. Largely spurned by settlers, ignored by consolidating colonial successors, and either patronised, romanticised or politicised by every generation thereafter, Aboriginal wisdom is the most under-utilised intellectual and emotional resource this country has. (Winton 2015b, 188–189)

In *The Boy Behind the Curtain* (Winton 2016) Winton recounts a journey into the Western Australian landscape and his encounters with the Indigenous people there. Yet Winton's greater engagement with this topic has not shielded him from further criticism. Writing about *Island Home*, Jessica White (2018) argues that "the amnesia in Winton's memoir speaks to a wider forgetting among non-Indigenous Australians" about the ongoing consequences of colonization (151). In *Literary Activists*, Brigid

Rooney (2009) poses the question: "But to what extent does Winton's recent activism address or compensate for the kinds of questions that trouble texts so strongly assertive of white Australian relationships to land – questions that haunt reader and writer alike?" (180). As the examples cited earlier demonstrate, the redemptive feeling of belonging experienced by Winton's non-Indigenous characters involves only "the briefest of nods to Aboriginal presence and claims" (180). Winton's ethics of the neighbour, however well intentioned, continues to be haunted by these lingering questions.

One notable response is Melissa Lucashenko's (2017) essay "I Pity the Poor Immigrant". Lucashenko excoriates the tendency in non-Indigenous writers, even in postcolonial critiques of Australia's history, to speak of Indigenous culture as though it belongs exclusively to the past. This mindset, argues Lucashenko, obscures the fact that there is a living, breathing Indigenous culture in our very own neighbourhood. This powerful tradition is maintained by the songlines that criss-cross the country:

> This body of complex interwoven narrative – our great Aboriginal creation myths – spans the continent […]. The songlines – which are still sung and performed today – constitute our Book of Genesis as well as our maps, our moral code and our encyclopaedia. Colonisation severely disrupted the songlines, but they are not destroyed. Scores of Aboriginal nations today find direction, and great meaning, and solace in their ongoing performance. (2017, 1)

This powerful image of a vibrant Indigenous culture, transmitted and maintained through the songlines, stands in contrast to the numerous representations of "dead Aboriginal people" (2) in Australian literature. The colonial narrative of the Indigenous peoples as a "Dying Race" (2) has thus been allowed to continue, argues Lukashenko, even in postcolonial discourse.

Lucashenko turns her attention to two examples: a short story by David Malouf (1993), "The Only Speaker of His Tongue", and Winton's *Island Home*. She captures perfectly the ambivalence of reading Winton's work, her emotions veering between admiration and sympathy, and a nauseating feeling of alienation and exclusion:

> But a funny thing kept happening with this memoir. I flowed between the two poles of respect and irritation again and again and again. I began sympathetic to Winton's project, then the more I read on and thought about his littoralism, the less impressed I became by it. […] By halfway through *Island Home*, I was beginning to feel a bit seasick. I was being mentally thrown about by the inconsistencies in Winton's outlook. (Lucashenko 2017, 5–6)

Like Rooney, Lucashenko is bemused by Winton's contradictions – "Winton writes one way and speaks another" (6) – so that she, too, is left asking the same ultimate question: "But what does it mean to love the country if there is little or no explicit recognition of Aboriginal ownership?" (6).

Lucashenko's essay, like Winton's editorial, is part of a search for an ethic of neighbourliness. This goal is epitomized by its brilliantly ambiguous epigraph – "*Dedicated to all refugees currently imprisoned by the Australian State*" (Winton 2015b, 1; original emphasis) – a sentence that extends its meaning beyond refugees in detention camps to include *all* people who have been imprisoned by the creation of the Australian State. The new element that Lucashenko brings to this debate is to emphasize how the ethical relationship involves time. What she rejects most vehemently in Malouf, in Winton, and in the Dying Race trope overall, is "being written about in the past tense" (Lucashenko 2017, 7). Indigenous people should not

be relegated to the past in this way – instead, the true neighbour, whoever they are, is defined by their "hereness", their presence in both space and time.

The *presence* of the neighbour should make us wary of the prevalence of hauntings in Australian literature. Crouch writes: "By definition a haunting implies a presence caught out of time. Confusing the binary between absence and presence, ghosts suggest a temporality in which past, present and future can be inter-implicated" (2007, 95). The ghost is a temporal glitch in the construction of contemporary reality, an "aberration" from the past that has somehow entered into the present. For Lucashenko, this logic translates back into the mindset of colonial Australia and its mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. "In the colonial project, to the British mind", she writes, "we were not just lower beings, but also aberrations, and the only things to do with aberrations are to destroy them, imprison them, or assimilate them into your own reality" (Lucashenko 2017, 1). The representation of Indigenous characters in *Cloudstreet* as ghostly and liminal beings is a direct outcome of this strategy, an attempted erasure made possible by the notion of "past tense Aborigines" (9). Relegating one's neighbour to the past is simultaneously to remove their troubling presence. "Is it valuable to acknowledge the horror of the past and present?" Lucashenko then asks. "Yes and no. Truth heals. *But partial truths do not*" (2017, 2; original emphasis). What she means by "partial truths" is not so much historical distortion as a realization that lamenting the past can become a distraction or excuse from acknowledging the present. It is possible to spend so much time mourning the ghosts of the past that we become blind to the ethical demands placed on us by our neighbours in the present, by what confronts us here and now.

The obligation to love

Winton seems, nonetheless, to grasp this ethic of the neighbour when it comes to non-Indigenous social groups that have suffered persecution in Australia. Consider the early story "Neighbours", for instance, from his first collection *Scission* (Winton 1987). In this brief narrative, Winton recounts the story of an unnamed "young couple" who move from the "expansive outer suburbs where good neighbours were seldom seen and never heard" to a new location that "was full of European migrants" (81). Winton juxtaposes the modernity of the young man's studies – he is writing a "thesis on the twentieth-century novel" (82) – and the ancient biblical ethics of neighbourly hospitality. The latter is referenced in the story's opening paragraph, in which the young couple's new surrounding makes them "feel like sojourners in a foreign land", a dual reference to Exodus 2:22 (when Moses famously refers to himself as "a stranger in a strange land" during his time in Midian) and Leviticus 25:35 (in which Jewish law commands that "thy brother" be taken care of in case of poverty, "yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner"). Although the loudness and vulgarity of the young couple's neighbours make them uncomfortable at first, a series of unexpected acts of kindness gradually changes their minds. The story culminates with the young woman giving birth to a baby boy, an event that is heralded by cheering from their Macedonian neighbours. Upon witnessing this gesture, Winton recounts, "the young man began to weep" because the "twentieth-century novel had not prepared him for this" (83). This closing line implies that modernity has discarded the ancient biblical ethics of the

neighbour, a loss that is highlighted by its unexpected reappearance in Australian migrant culture.

What happens if the neighbour we encounter, rather than being kind, turns out to be a cruel, misogynist wife-beater? Such is the problem that Winton confronts in *Eyrie*, published 30 years after "Neighbours", when the reader meets Gemma Buck's father. In *Eyrie*, the consequences of being commanded to love one's neighbour are explored from the perspective of strength. The moral ideal on which the novel's protagonist, Tom Keely, models himself is his father Neville, a "moral, physical giant" (Winton 2015c, 128), whose muscular body reflects his ethical will. Keely remembers his father with a mixture of admiration and sadness, recalling how Neville had transcended his working-class origins to pursue his faith, studying theology and joining the local church, "bringing a bit of shopfloor pugnacity to matters of the spirit" (128). Neville tries to bend the world to the morality of divine justice, to force it to conform to God's love, using his physical strength when necessary to achieve this outcome. In one memorable scene, Keely remembers his father's physical confrontation with his wife-beating "shit-head" (34) of a neighbour:

> Two men facing off in the driveway. Johnny Buck in his work duds. Neville Keely in stubbies and a singlet. Plenty of lights on across the road, next door, silhouettes in every front garden, but no help forthcoming. In the porchlight, Nev circling, voice like a horse whisperer, sleep in his eyes and grease in the cracks of his hands. Johnny Buck staggering, squinting to keep him in view. Nev pressing in, smiling, feinting, nattering about Forgiveness and Letting Go, and Owning Up, and Giving In to Love, a kind of dancing, panting midnight homily brought to a head by a sudden lunge and a half-nelson that had the nasty little prick on his arse in a moment. And it was hard to forget the sight of a big man like Nev blessing Johnny Buck while burying his face in the grass. The faceless neighbours cheered; he remembered that. (34)

Winton makes a pointed contrast between the hypocrisy and abstract anonymity of the theoretical altruists – the "faceless neighbours" (34) who absent themselves from the scene of conflict while watching on – and the particularity of the antagonists, the force of the physical presence of the two fighting men.

What also sticks in the memory of Keely – who, it should be remembered, is watching as a child from the same shadows, along with the other "spineless spectators" (Winton 2015c, 34) – is the effect of his father's ethical intervention on Mrs Buck, Johnny's wife. Instead of thanking Neville for intervening on her behalf, she curses him:

> And then Nev abruptly prevailing, kneeling on him, like a man in prayer, pinning the shithead's arms to the earth until the bloke was weeping. A moment later his wife was at his side to comfort him and call Nev a churchy fuckin bully-bastard who should mind his own bloody business. It was confounding. And it felt wrong that her humiliated fuck-you should remain as indelible as the violence itself. But even now the memory brought a welter of shame along with the pride. (34)

The source of Keely's shame has to do with the problematic principle underlying Neville's intervention, from the paradox of being commanded to *love* your neighbour. Genuine love, after all, is not something that has to be commanded: the very existence of love is motivation enough to put its edicts into practice.

The commandment to love, therefore, speaks to a hidden reluctance on the part of the subject, a lack of love, a revulsion even, that the subject seeks to deny by playing the part of an ethical agent. As Slavoj Žižek (2007) argues in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*:

> When in his *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, Lacan emphasises Freud's restraint toward the Christian "love for one's neighbour", he has in mind precisely such embarrassing dilemmas: it is easy to love the idealised figure of a poor, helpless neighbour, the starving African or Indian, for example; in other words, it is easy to love one's neighbour as long as he stays far enough from us, as long as there is a proper distance separating us. The problem arises at the moment when he comes too near us, when we start to feel his suffocating proximity – at this moment when the neighbour exposes himself to us too much, love can suddenly turn into hatred. (9)

Such a paradox raises the crucial question of the extent to which the commandment to love is, in fact, ethical, for not only does it transform into a superego that demands the impossible – that the subject love the neighbour *against their own desire* – but often has the effect, as Mrs Buck's reaction demonstrates, of creating a backlash that perversely jumps to the defence of the original evil action.

The ethical problem of the imperative to love may seem at first to be disconnected from the issue of ignoring one's actual neighbour in favour of mourning a traumatic loss in the past, but a closer look at *Eyrie* shows that these two elements are intimately linked. The father–son relationship between Neville and Tom Keely, for instance, is clearly the ideal by which the latter's moral character is formed. On the one hand, the pride and admiration Keely feels for his father's upright character is replicated in his work as an environmental activist, a path he follows even as it leads him, in a repetition of his father's religious activism, to disgrace and ruin. On the other hand, Neville's demise causes his son to idealize him so ardently that Keely feels that showing a greater sense of pragmatism would somehow be a betrayal of his father's putative moral purity:

> A good man, his father, but not always smart. It was only when he was gone that Christ's puzzling injunction to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves began to make brutal sense. Indeed it became a rueful family motto. To which Doris and Faith had been trying to return Keely's attention for several years. And they were right. In both marriage and work he'd become more angry than effective, more impatient than observant and more honest than useful. Wal saw him as a chip off the old block. And maybe Gemma did too. But he was just not that man. (Winton 2015c, 130)

Even though Keely follows a similar biographical pattern to Neville, therefore, he nonetheless feels as though he is only a simulacrum of his dead father. Others may regard him as a "chip off the old block", but the guilt that drives Keely is rooted in his eternal sense that he cannot live up to such as a title. He views himself as a failed version of the paternal ideal, even though he readily acknowledges his father's practical flaws.

Keely, in short, is haunted by the ghost of his own father. The problem is not that Neville is unworthy of admiration, but that Tom has "modelled himself upon a memory" (Winton 2015c, 127) that has become an impossible ideal: "How could you measure up?" (127). In a familiar pattern, this mourning for the ghost of his lost father causes Tom Keely to ignore the people connected to him in the present – his former wife Harriet, his mother Doris, his sister Faith:

> His father.
>
> Once more.
>
> Forever.
>
> The father.
>
> Keely walked homeward stung but more or less coherent, as if Wally's bluntness had momentarily unscrambled him.
>
> Lame that it always came back to this. Faith said he was a man who needed reminding he had a mother, a parent who had not been dead thirty-five years.
>
> Yet there it was. The father-shaped hole in him, hot and deep and realer than any notion he had words for. (127)

Eyrie recounts the attempt by Keely to overcome this past, to exorcise his personal spectre in the form of this "father-shaped hole" (127). Winton pointedly has him achieve this task by reconnecting with his neighbour, Gemma Buck, who had also been his neighbour when they were children, and her little boy, Kai. This redemptive arc in *Eyrie* is thus an implicit return to the earlier exploration of this same theme in the early story "Neighbours".

One's neighbour here

It is important to understand Winton's position as a product not just of politics, but also of his religious beliefs, which provide the main ethical principle in his texts. In an essay examining sublimated religious belief in Freud and Lacan, Marcia Ian (1997) argues that these two apparently anti-religious thinkers are indelibly marked by their philosophical opposition to their respective religious traditions. "What Lacan and Freud both negate", she writes, "is religious belief" (123). Religious belief is not eliminated by this gesture of negation, argues Ian, but continues to exist in a sublimated, repressed form, so that we should regard "Freud as an imaginary *non*-Jew, and Lacan as an imaginary *non*-Catholic" (140; original emphases). Winton openly identifies as a Christian, but has many times expressed his ambivalent attitude towards religion, as in his essay "Twice on Sundays" from *The Boy Behind the Curtain*:

> Expressing faith is not unlike expressing love, for both involve fraught searches for exactly the right phrase when it often seems there are none good, true, or safe enough to do the job, and a wrong word at the wrong moment can be catastrophic. (Winton 2016, 107)

Winton explains that his mixed feelings derive primarily from his frustration with the Christian tendency to focus on the hereafter, whereas his own ethics demands attention to the here and now, a position he reiterates by quoting the English poet W.H. Auden: "Eternity is the decision *now*, action now, one's neighbour *here*" (115; original emphasis). Winton's religious position differs markedly from that of Freud or Lacan, but there is nonetheless a resistant quality to his spirituality, which embraces the Christian perspective with a mind that is full of doubts, cautions, hesitations, questions – to put a new twist on Ian's terms, Winton sometimes comes across as a *non-non*-Christian.

The problem of "the neighbour *here*", to reuse Auden's phrase, is particularly pertinent to *Cloudstreet*, in which the exigencies of shared physical closeness require its central characters to negotiate (and renegotiate) their ethical relationships with one another. Biblical references to the ethics of the neighbour emerge explicitly late in the novel, when Quick Lamb expresses his approval for the death sentence that, in one of the novel's subplots, is given to the Nedlands Monster, a real-life serial killer who terrorized Perth from 1959 to 1963. Quick's sentiments result in an argument with his mother, Oriel, who despite her abrasive, judgemental personality, is vehemently opposed to the death penalty: "Killin [sic] is men's business, she said, not God's. […] If you think it's somethin [sic] to celebrate leave God out of it" (Winton 1992, 395). In the wake of this disagreement, Lester takes Quick aside and reads to him from the Sermon on the Mount to explain Oriel's ethical position: "*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*" (395; original emphasis). As McCredden observes, in Winton's narratives the reader can, through such important passages, see at work the "theology of Winton's fiction – for this is what it is, a moral and ethical theology" (2016, 4).

Curiously enough, the only critical piece so far to deal explicitly with the theme of neighbourliness in Winton's work, Bárbara Arizti's (2013) article "New Possibilities of Neighbouring: Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*", does not address the religious aspect of this question. While Arizti highlights some of the novel's important allusions to Christianity, unlike McCredden she largely bypasses the issue of Winton's religious faith and its influence on his work. Instead, she presents her interpretation through two theoretical frameworks. The first is Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, with Arizti drawing in particular from his landmark works *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1969) and *Otherwise Than Being* (Levinas 1998). Levinas, she points out, describes how humanity is in a fundamental relationship with the Face of the Other, the neighbour – a connection that is sublimated, in turn, by those we encounter who are in distress. Arizti places Levinas's theory alongside Kenneth Reinhard's essay "Towards a Political Theology of the Neighbour", which challenges the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt by way of Freud and Lacan. Reinhard's piece is the first entry in a tripartite discussion, along with Eric L. Santner and Slavoj Žižek, on the topic of the neighbour, published together in the collection *The Neighbour: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Santner, Reinhard, and Žižek 2005).

Unlike Ian, who emphasizes how crucial variations in the theories of Freud and Lacan were produced by their different religious backgrounds, Arizti operates as though unaware she is deploying a mainly Jewish ethical framework in order to analyse a text by an author whose frame of reference is explicitly Christian. The result is a translation of the ethics of the neighbour back into a universal humanism. Take Arizti's analysis of the scene in which Quick, in an echo of his brother Fish's near-drowning, pulls the body of a dead boy from the river, learning shortly afterward that it was the son of the Nedlands Monster. Quick says to his wife Rose that the experience shows him how easily he, too, might have reacted to his brother's death by becoming a monster:

> I know how that poor bastard feels. […] I could've turned out angry and cold like *him*. […] But it's not us and them anymore. It's us and us and us. It's always us. […] [T]here's no monsters, only people like us. (Winton 1992, 402; original emphasis)

Arizti rightly views this scene as an important example of Winton's humanism, with the apparently opposite moral poles represented by policeman and killer giving "way to the simultaneous acceptance of heterogeneity and sameness" (Arizti 2013, 13). Arizti then asserts that "Quick's 'us and us' resonates with Levinas's form of radical humanism" (14), a philosophical equation that appears problematic in light of some crucial divisions separating Jewish from Christian ethical thought.

This difference is highlighted, for instance, by Žižek in his own contribution to the discussion with Reinhard and Santner, an essay titled "Neighbours and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence". According to Žižek, the Christian/humanist understanding of the neighbour, exemplified by Arizti's essay, often starts out as something antagonistic – the Nedlands Monster, for instance, or the ghosts that haunt *Cloudstreet* – but, through an act of imaginative empathy, is brought into a position of apparent reconciliation. This way of conceiving the neighbour understands the Other as our concealed double, the "us and us", to use Quick's term, that we initially perceive with hostility only because we do not yet possess the wisdom to see that, deep down, they are really the same as us. Žižek points out that Jewish ethics is based on a very different conception of the neighbour:

> When the Old Testament enjoins you to love and respect your neighbour, this does not refer to your imaginary *semblable*/double, but to the neighbour qua traumatic Thing. In contrast to the New Age attitude which ultimately reduces my Other/Neighbour to my mirror-image or to the means in the path of my self-realization […] Judaism opens up a tradition in which an alien traumatic kernel forever persists in my Neighbour – the Neighbour remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence that hystericises me. The core of this presence, of course, is the Other's desire, an enigma not only for us, but also for the Other itself. (Santner, Reinhard, and Žižek 2005, 140–141)

Whereas the Christian (and indeed, "*not*-Christian" humanist) trope of the neighbour imagines a one-sided redemptive reconciliation with the hostile neighbour, Jewish ethical thought conceives of the neighbour as a problem of the real that is defined by its irreconcilability: the neighbour is a traumatic figure that may not necessarily be befriended, understood, or won over.

There is much at stake in how we think about these two different ethical visions of the neighbour, especially when it comes to Australia's colonial legacy. "In an Australian context", writes Arizti, "the politics of the neighbour cannot obviate the country's past history of colonisation and its everlasting impact upon the present" (2013, 15). After all, the ghosts of *Cloudstreet* are also, in a sense, "neighbours", the result of the house's traumatic history as an institution for Indigenous women. While acknowledgement of the past remains essential for any ethics, for this reason I remain suspicious of the concept of spectrality, which can too easily distract us, as Lucashenko points out, from the material neighbour before us here and now. The lure of the spectral, of an imaginary redemption, is what makes *Cloudstreet*, as a novel, and particularly as an *Australian* novel, so naively seductive, for it offers a cheap salve to the stinging wound of colonial wrongdoing. The overall narrative of *Cloudstreet* avoids falling into saccharine fantasy, at least, by the way it opens and closes with the re-embodiment of the spectral character of Fish, whose death signals the return of the traumatic real. Fish's death is a material reminder that the real cannot be fantasized out of existence. This is true not only for the Lambs and the Pickles, but also for Australia as a nation: the real trauma of the past is not a spectre with which it

can reconcile simply by *imagining* a reconciliation, but will continue to exist as a core of ethical unease that is integral to its existence.

It is this urgency of the neighbour before me, of their invasive presence here and now, that makes Winton hesitate before the Christian lure of spectrality. It was this same life-denying tendency, after all, that caused him to reassess his relationship with the church. "Amidst the church's growing obsession with right thinking and self-censorship, one thing above all others drove me wild", he writes in "Twice on Sundays":

> Not the sad reversion to tribalism, nor even the neurotic preoccupation with sex, but the contention, as many a chorus had it, that *this world is not my home*. […] I'd grown uncomfortable with the repudiation of human life implicit in it. (Winton 2016, 114; original emphasis)

Alongside the moral and ethical theology that McCredden identifies in Winton's work, then, there coexists an affirmation of the material. Winton develops this materialist critique, paradoxically, in order to preserve the very ethical principles of love and neighbourliness that he sees as Christianity's essential core. That is why there stretches across his oeuvre the recurrent motif of a religious faith that outwardly *appears* to have been lost to the external world but which, upon further examination, retains a hidden, internal integrity. Consider, for instance, the guilty old man in *An Open Swimmer* (Winton 1982) who rolls his cigarettes with pages torn from Deuteronomy, or the devastating loss of faith that marks the devout Lamb family after Fish's accident, or the defrocked Irish priest Fintan MacGillis, banished into the symbolic wilderness for his sins in Winton's newest novel, *The Shepherd's Hut* (Winton 2018). These characters are haunted by a sense of spiritual abandonment, yet for Winton the real test of their character lies not in this sinful past but in how they act towards their neighbours in the here and now. In this respect, at least, Winton converges with Lucashenko: the ethical principle of neighbourliness rests not just in the spectral remains of the past, but in the living urgency of the present moment.

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